

Regarding Deedee

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Natalie

That day, on the landing of the house that has been so quiet the whole early morning, she hears from outside the name of Deedee. She does not wait to hear who it is or what, it's enough that it has something to do with Deedee, something regarding Deedee, in the neighborhood, more or less nearby, in any case concerning . . . Deedee, and without delay she shambles to the stairs. By the banister she turns too fast and for the umpteenth time the pus in her middle ear does something irreparable to her eardrum.

“Oh,” Natalie says and the pain, familiar after all those years yet always surprisingly close by, slows her movement; she grasps the banister intently, leaning forward. Her bosom spills over the wood like a floral cushion for everyone—including Deedee—to admire, like something not of woman, not of human flesh; she snorts, clears her throat, and shouts, “Oh ho!”

“Oh ho!” From below, with the same intonation but a touch more cheerful, Jeanne answers, and anyone who could not see the two sisters—like Deedee in his room—would have every reason to suppose, hearing their giggly voices, that Jeanne downstairs and Natalie upstairs (separated from Deedee by no more than a door) are very young girls. So Natalie believes. At the school in Schilferinge they used to call out to each other like that on the playground, just like that. Untouched they were then, both of them.

Natalie starts waving her right hand even before she's seen anybody and, panting, rounds the corner of the staircase. Shuffling forward, she sees her family with Luttie the maid removing their hats and jackets in the hall. Everyone is there; they must have agreed to meet in Roeselare, Jeanne with her Giaco, and Albert, and Antoine and his Lotte, and then that bitch in heat, that woman, Madame Tilly. Why does she always have to tag along? She's not one of the family! Is she here to help? Oh lordy lord, the things she gets up to! More hindrance than help! But Deedee always likes to have her in the house; she's such a live wire, a barrel of laughs. That's why she's allowed to come along. Still, if it were up to Natalie, that hellcat would never darken her door again. Laughs or no laughs.

Madame Tilly makes a beeline for her with a smile that exposes her square teeth, and presses her permanent against Natalie's cheek.

“Natalie, Natalie! You’re so much thinner! You look fabulous!”

“Now, Tilly . . .” She means to say it’s bad manners to jump in front of Natalie’s own flesh and blood, to insist on greeting her before her brothers and sister have had a chance, but she wants to start the day on the right foot, and the fact that she looks so much thinner warms Natalie’s heart. “All right, all right, now, Tilly,” she says.

“But it’s true, Natalie”—Jeanne seems surprised—“you’ve lost at least twenty pounds.”

“How much?” Lotte cries.

“Not another word about it,” Natalie says, and she turns her attention to her nephew, her heart’s torment, her Claude, standing so solemnly by the hat rack, and kisses him. His face feels clammy and cold. She lays her index finger against the zipper of his leather jacket. “Sweetheart, you’re not taking care of yourself.”

“Yes I am, Aunt Natalie.”

“He has a cold,” says Albert, the concerned parent, “it’s dragged on for four weeks already. But Mr. Vespa here won’t stop racing around at all hours of the night.”

Upon which Natalie calls out toward the kitchen, “Put on some hot water, will you?” She hates to see how Madame Tilly has already infiltrated Luttie’s domain (and her own, for although she’s not *obliged* to work in the kitchen—on the contrary! Deedee wouldn’t approve of her defiling her hands with dishwasher—still, this whole house is entirely under her authority) and how that wily Tilly woman has begun scurrying around the gas stove this very first, terribly thoughtless moment that she, Natalie, gave herself over to her family. “Luttie, boil some water for grog,” she calls.

“You’re shouting again,” Jeanne says.

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

“You shouldn’t overexcite yourself, it’s bad for your cholesterol.”

“True, true,” Natalie says quickly.

“It’s on account of her perforated eardrum, Aunt Jeanne,” Claude says. “All deaf people shout like that.”

“I’m not deaf.” Natalie laughs uneasily; Claude loves to tease her.

“No, Aunt Natalie, but the cartilage in your ear is rotten through and through, isn’t it?”

“Oh, shove off, Claude,” Jeanne says, but she doesn’t mean it.

“In her head there’s the bong of a big brass gong,” Claude sings.

“Cornball.” Natalie rumbles with pleasure, and then kisses Albert and Antoine and shakes Giaco’s hand.

“Come on, come on.” In the second hall, with the grandfather clock and the harmonium, between the shuffling of their shoes and Antoine’s shrill, jabbering voice, she strains to hear the rustle, familiar only to her, from the upper left room, like a cat or child scratching at the door. It seems to her she hears it, and she lets out a little grunt at Jeanne, who is stroking her sister’s broad flanks. It is a lovely day, a happy day. Jeanne has abandoned her foreigner—that Italian, Giaco—to his fate, and he loiters by the door of the office, beating the dust out of his jacket and studying the hand-tinted, life-size photograph of His Eminence the Cardinal.

“And Deedee?” Jeanne whispers.

“He’s shaving.”

“Aha.” Jeanne’s tone is meaningful; she tuts with her tongue. Why?

“Silly goose.” Blushing, Natalie leads her sister toward the sitting room where the others are waiting.

“He’s grooming himself for us,” Jeanne explains as they enter the room, and Antoine says, “For Natalie, you mean?” and everybody laughs.

The start of the annual gathering is always a little awkward—as if they’ve become unused to each other, as if decisive events in the past year have estranged them, thrown up barriers to conversation.

Now’s when they find out if that’s really so. They fiddle with their hair, their ties, the collars of their dresses, so, what’s new with you? First Natalie.

Natalie’s been through an operation on her left foot.

“So the doctor says to me, ‘Madame,’ he says. ‘Excuse me,’ I say. ‘Mademoiselle, if you please.’ ‘Well, Mademoiselle,’ he says, a specialist, a serious person, getting on in years, ‘Well, you have to understand, your weight being what it is, your whole body *naturally* presses down on your feet, there’s no escaping it, and your feet—you only have two—just can’t take the pressure.’”

“Of course. Your body fat sags downwards,” Antoine says.

“Exactly. ‘Well then, you’d better operate,’ I said, ‘if that’s Our Lord’s will.’ Of course, the mutual care wouldn’t pay because I’m not a member. Deedee’s against it.”

Then they went on vacation, she and Deedee. Did you all get your postcards from Greece? Why, yes. Thank you, Natalie. Yes, everyone’s going to Greece these days. And well they should, with all that classical rubble and everything. Highly archaeological, as well. And so restful.

What’s new with Giaco and Jeanne is trouble with the tenants in their house on Oudenaardse Steenweg, a question of the roof, and naturally they, the owners, are left holding the bag again.

Albert was sent to prison because he—allegedly—bit a police officer in the calf. That’s not even physically possible, says Albert, and the family concurs, because the officer in question plays outside left on the Harelbeke soccer team, and everyone knows soccer players have calves of granite. Bite into those and you’ll break your teeth.

Antoine and Lotte have a new TV antenna. Now they can get Holland. Wonderful dramas, but they talk much too fast, and with a northern accent.

Nothing is new with Claude, except that the doctor says he’ll never get better if he doesn’t watch himself every day. Albert sends his son out into the hallway to fetch cigarettes from his raincoat and then grumbles, “It’s still an awful burden for me to bear, I’ll tell you that.”

“It’s a tough situation,” Antoine says. “Hush,” Natalie hisses, and she greets the boy all over again as if for the first time, her heart’s affliction, her sweet Claude.

“You’ve been talking about me again,” Claude says.

“Who has? We have? Why?” says the family.

“Oh, Claude,” Natalie says, and then she nervously shouts, “Luttie, the coffee.”

“And a splash of something stronger.” Albert’s grooved face is an impish mask.

“Watch out, or Father . . .” Lotte begins, but Natalie brandishes an admonishing finger.

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah.”

“Of course,” Lotte says, “I had entirely forgotten. What I meant to say was, ‘Make sure *Dee-dee* doesn’t hear about you drinking.’”

“Dee,” Claude says. He takes a breath, and says more softly, “Dee.” He looks underfed. That boy will never be happy.

“Drinking before Mass,” Natalie fumes, “are you utterly . . .”

“He was only joking.” Of course Lotte makes excuses for her brother-in-law; everyone loves Albert. He’s a wreck, but he muddles on as best he can. It’s hard to imagine now how handsome he used to be. In those days, he was the only one who didn’t realize—or at least, he got far too little benefit out of it. Now all he has left is his triumphant, regal bearing. Beneath the furrows in his skin, the lightless eyes whose lower eyelids curl outward, the toothless mouth (how much do dentures cost? at least six or seven thousand francs!), the frayed shirt with two buttons undone forming a pitiful contrast with the smart black jacket that he probably bought for the occasion—beneath all the shabbiness, Albert still glows with the triumphs of his youth.

Albert the Undefeated. Back in their village, they used to call him the Handsome Brute.

Jeanne has gone grayer. Natalie decides not to mention it, at least not before Mass. Obviously that foreigner of hers won’t let her dye it. Giaco probably never even had to forbid it in so many words. Eight years ago, the year Natalie moved into to Deedee’s house, Jeanne took refuge here, here in Memmel. Giaco had beaten her for wearing lipstick. Deedee disapproved of this foreign way of

behaving, and Giaco had to ask his wife's forgiveness in Deedee's office. He cried that day, Giaco did. It served him right. The way he depends on his wife, the beautiful, vicious, domesticated Jeanne! They earn good money with their pharmaceuticals, but why? Because Jeanne visits the pharmacists and brings them around with her bold and crafty ways. And what does he do? He waits in the car. And he can't even drive properly. Natalie hates Giaco, because her sister has changed into an insecure, bitter, foreign woman, because he has sunk his claws into her.

The china is laid on black-and-blue checkered oilcloth that Deedee's brother brought years ago. The brother, a Mongoloid with twenty gray hairs under his chin, is now in a frame with a black taffeta band on top of the TV set.

"Good old Jan," Deedee sometimes says, or "Our little man Jan."

"O, Luttie, no," Natalie calls out to the maid, who is on the verge of serving Giaco coffee, but he's already covering his cup with his hand. "Forgive me," he says curtly.

"No?" asks Luttie.

"No," snarls Natalie, and then, to soften the blow, to deflect it—since she sees Jeanne turning to face her with her lips in a conciliatory pucker—she cheerfully says to Claude, "Take care not to swallow the cloves!"

"Right, he'll swallow anything, just like his dad," Antoine says.

"Oh, come on," Lotte says. Giaco has turned the coffee cup upside down in front of him and his eyes are fixed on the blue mark on its phlegm-white bottom.

"And how do you like your new Vespa?" Natalie wants to know.

"Well, Auntie . . ."

"Oh, he wrecked it," Albert breaks in. "Shot it all to hell."

"Hey, hey, hey, watch your language a little, OK? You're a guest here, you know!" Antoine says.

Claude explains why the battery . . . where the ignition . . . and how that makes the flywheel . . . but Natalie remains worried. "What will Deedee think," she said. "He insisted, remember, that he would only give you the Vespa if you took especially good care of it. and now . . ."

"But Auntie, it's not my fault, the transmission . . ."

"Don't give your aunt any of that 'transmission'," Albert, the father, says gruffly.

"But I don't want Deedee to think it's my fault!" the boy says.

"It's never his fault; it was always somebody else," Albert says.

Natalie suppresses a yawn and pushes herself upright. In the kitchen, Madame Tilly is sitting spread-eagled, keeping Luttie from her work. Natalie collapses onto a kitchen chair, fatigue glowing in her ankles, in her calves. She closes her eyes for an instant, but no, she mustn't, what

would that Tilly woman think of her, a spineless hunk of flesh just out of bed and already nodding off again by sunup.

She returns. The veranda catches the sunlight, and eighteen different colored panes light up the window of the drawing room and the seven people in it, the full annual family except for Tatty, Albert's wife and (sad to say) Claude's mother. The thing is, Tatty drinks, and is so ashamed that she doesn't dare face the rest of the family. "Long live Tatty," Albert will say later, after a few glasses of wine.

Natalie has her coffee without milk or sugar. So how much does she weigh these days, anyway?

"Two hundred and twenty five pounds," she says flatly.

Giacco nods as if he had already known, twisting his thick, blue lips (so different in shape from ours) into a downward curve and drawing the numerals in the air with a ringed finger: curve-line, curve-line, line-line-curve.

"Still, there's been some progress," Antoine reckons.

"About time, too." Lotte says.

"Cause I started at two hundred forty."

"Two hundred and forty pounds," Lotte says in awe.

"Fat or not, she's all mine." Claude grabs hold of Natalie, stroking her curly, graying hair and nibbling at her ear.

"Oh, get away, you sweet-talker." But Natalie, crimson-cheeked, does not let go of the boy; she wants to show them all (oh, the nasty rumors they spread about her and Claude when he spent the night here a few years ago, but all that is forgiven and forgotten) his affection for her, to rub it in their faces, this moment of connection between her and pale Claude, to pin it down, display it on the wall, but it doesn't last.

"Aha," "Finally," "Ah," "There he is," the Heylen family cries, growls, murmurs, and Deedee enters the drawing room.

Every time—and this is the eighth year they've come together in the tall house in the heart of this rural village—Natalie marvels at the perfect lack of noise with which Deedee appears in a doorway, the stairwell, a window, and today again she vaguely admires this learned and practiced stealth. And it gladdens her to see the awe he inspires in her family. They revere him, just as the notary, mayor, doctor, and smallholders of Memmel revere him, the man who is her master. Even Claude, whom she now releases (Clod of Earth, as Deedee now and then playfully calls him) has wiped the scornful grin off his face.

In two long strides, Deedee walks up to the Heylens, extends his arms, and greets the visitors in a sonorous voice, and there in his scent and the glow of his presence, she, Natalie, greets them again through him.

"We're all here," she says.

“Bravo,” says Deedee. “Well, well, well.”

“Yes,” the family says. “Yes, yes.”

Deedee washes his hands right up to the wrists, close to his watch. He has a bright white shirt on, Natalie notices between his arms, and he’s brushed his dark red hair. She is contented. Now? Already? Before the party has begun? There’s something perilous about her overconfidence, and so she says,

“But Tatty couldn’t come. She isn’t feeling well and has to stay in bed.”

“I see,” says Deedee, in a half-skeptical tone.

Albert just nods. “Yes,” he says, “it’s something, isn’t it!”

Just look at that stylish figure mingling with the Heylens now, charming them all, winning them over. What care Deedee takes with his personal appearance, how thoroughly he manages—even here in the middle of Memmel, surrounded by manure heaps and grimy farmers—to remain every inch a man of the world. And for whom? For whom else than the person who serves him, studies him, contemplates him daily? For Natalie.

“Go on and sit down,” she says, and adds, more quietly, “Deedee.” Yes, today, once a year, that is his name for them and also for her: d.d. and nothing else. *Dienst-doende*. Provisional pastor.

The family and Deedee repeat to each other that they look well, that the weather is not half bad for the time of year, that the wild celery flowers are already looking lovely, really lovely, just the way she liked to see them, and that Mother Dear, if she is looking down on them from Heaven—as she undoubtedly is—must be pleased with the sight of her offspring, and that Mother Dear—in spite of everything—went away too soon, but that on the other hand she was fortunately released from her suffering. “We would never have wished for it, but even so, it’s all for the best that it went so quickly.”

“Absolutely. Why should she have to suffer longer?”

Even Madame Tilly, whose own Mother was anything but Dear, sees fit to contribute. “Doctors! It’s easy for them to talk, but at the end of the day, cancer is cancer. And that includes the kidneys.”

Natalie yawns. It could be low blood sugar. Even though for breakfast she had bacon and three eggs, she feels a little drowsy—faint, even.

The weird prism of the veranda panes drifts across the room. Over Claude’s shoulder, the garden is visible: the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, the rhododendrons. Beyond it is Memmel: six thousand souls flocked around their pastor, wheat fields, a furniture factory, twelve bars. A beautiful summer.

Isn’t it time for Natalie to comb her hair?

“No.” Natalie presses the thin dark wires to her temple.

“Oh, yes,” Jeanne insists, and with a vaguely seductive, vaguely menacing expression, she leads Natalie to the toilet. Sitting down and making too much noise—the toilet is close to the drawing

room and Deedee has sharp ears—Jeanne says to Natalie, who has given in to her younger sister as usual and is standing in front of the mirror trying to do something with her zinc-colored hair, “He hasn’t changed.”

“How about me?”

“You haven’t changed either, Natalie.”

“I take good care of him.”

Jeanne flushes the toilet, comes to the mirror, and puffs a cloud of hair spray over her hair. “He’s still full of fire. It’s amazing how much longer men can hold out than women. They can stay on the move so much longer, while we . . .”

“He’s only forty-six.”

“In the prime of his life.”

“You should have seen him on the Greek islands. The fox, they called him there. Because of his hair.”

“Is all his hair as red as that?” Both women are startled. Through a chink in the door, they see one eye, a bit of eyebrow, and the flattened, purple half-mouth that posed the shameless, teasing question, and then in the open door Madame Tilly says,

“Well? Go on and answer, Natalie, if you dare.”

Natalie bides her time. It’s too early in the day to take offense; it would spoil her digestion, and besides, nothing has happened yet today, these are mere preliminary skirmishes in the day outstretched before them in all its glory, a happy day, Dear Mother’s special day.

“Well? Is it?” Natalie hesitates, trying to calm herself. “Is his hair that same gorgeous red color all over?”

“I won’t say,” Natalie replies with dignity. Then Madame Tilly and Jeanne, that traitor, burst into giggles. Much too noisily.

“That’s no business of *either one of you*,” Natalie snaps.

“Don’t be that way, dearie,” Jeanne says. “It’s just us girls here,” and Natalie is hurt that “us girls” includes that vulgar woman (whose sister in Antwerp lives with a divorced man). Madame Tilly wriggles past Natalie’s back into the cool, narrow cell and lifts her skirt. Natalie rushes out through the doorway.

In the hall, her exasperation fades. After all, Madame Tilly can’t help it that she had no one to teach her manners. Natalie sails back into the drawing room, where the men are discussing Cuba. Deedee quotes from memory a passage she read in the newspaper the day before and now recalls with a pang of admiration. What a memory that man has, it’s enough to make you jealous, the way he keeps all that knowledge boxed up in his brain, you can almost hear the article’s punctuation in his sentences. He is the light of her existence. As she grows older, grayer, more devout, he keeps a little

flame alive in her; without him, she would be dead in life. Jeanne, you will never experience anything like it, not with that creepy foreigner of yours; Jeanne, I can't ever tell a soul; Deedee is a saint and you know the simple reason why? Because he keeps me alive, simply because he's here, here with me.

She asks if anybody else wants coffee.

"I do," Albert says, "because this stuff ain't malt, by golly."

"Do you drink malt coffee at home?" Deedee leans in. "I hear it's so much healthier than coffee."

"For the liver," Giaco says, and he points to the watch half protruding from his breast pocket.

"And for the wallet," Albert says. "Coffee's not a thing we can afford. Good golly, no. Not on my unemployment."

"And your wife's?" Antoine asks hatefully, but—thank goodness—nobody reacts. The Heylens know that once the subject of Tatty comes up, Albert will never stop griping, and he'll soon start telling the story of his life.

"Fortunately," Lotte says, "malt coffee isn't the only thing you drink."

"No, it isn't—is it, you old boozier?" Antonie adds gleefully. He never knows where to stop; he doesn't know his place. Natalie's corset is stifling her; she sits down; it doesn't help.

"Well, a pint now and then always goes down easy," says Deedee, every inch a member of the family, down to his choice of words. Normally he's never this casual, this easy-going, this friendly. He's not much of a talker, normally.

"Still, there's no point in overdoing it."

"But my father never overdoes it," Claude says.

"Ha!"

"What's this we hear, Claude?"

Claude says, "It's too bad he *doesn't* overdo it sometimes. Then at least he'd have a hangover the next day."

"And you'd like to see your old man with a hangover," Albert gripes.

"Oh, I get what you're saying," replies Antoine.

"By gosh, I have lots of hangovers—lots of them!" Albert thunders, and then adds bashfully, "I do, Deedee, I do."

"I'm sure that's true," Deedee answers.

"I'll be a son of a gun if it isn't true. Hangovers that have me climbing the walls. Sometimes I see triple, or—even more!"

"Course you do."

"And if that piece of shit—begging your pardon, Deedee—if he thinks I never get hung over . . ."

"No matter." Deedee's broad, smooth forehead breaks into bumps and creases; he turns it to Natalie and raises his eyebrows. It's time to go, or at least to put a sock in this conversation. Conscious of her duties, she asks if anyone else wants coffee, but the bereaved family has noticed Deedee's expression, and everyone refuses. Then they see Deedee striding through the garden, hunched forward all of a sudden, with a book or satchel underneath his elbow, crossing himself at the grotto of Bernadette of Lourdes and, without looking back at the house or at them, opening the garden gate, closing it behind him, and vanishing along the hedge and the churchyard.

"A serious man," says Antoine.

"Not a bad word to be said about him," Lotte promptly adds, and the moment reverberates with the long drawl of their marriage, no children, bridge on Saturdays and TV every night, Flemish Brussels, their fear of cancer, their love for their neutered tomcat Whisky.

"A stylish figure," Natalie says, and listens. Nobody responds. The family agrees, but no one steps up to the plate; there's a gap in the silence.

"A man of distinction," Madame Tilly says, and Natalie could just kiss her.

But of course, that would never do. Natalie kisses her sister, her two brothers and two sisters-in-law, her nephew Claude, and—until five years ago—Mother Dear and no one else in the whole wide world. They're fleeting kisses, the other cheek hardly touches her lips, and often she kisses the air or even the down of a cheek. The skin she knows best is Claude's, firm and clammy, practically beardless even though he's twenty. It's connected to his, what's the word, condition. *Illness* is too strong.

"Still and all . . . Deedee does seem more standoffish than last year," Lotte says. "Maybe we've offended him without knowing it. You never really know whether you've wronged somebody, do you, or what the consequences might be . . ."

"Lotte, you're babbling," her husband says.

"Aunt Lotte's right," Claude says.

"And you," Antoine says sharply, "should show your father a little more respect when strangers are around."

"Ah, shut your face," Claude says dismissively, and he takes two steps to the left, because he sees his father lifting his buttocks and shifting his weight to the arms of his seat as if preparing to fly off the handle.

Antoine sighs. “Dear me, Albert,” he says, becoming ancient, drifting alongside his brother like castaways on an unknown ocean. He clicks his tongue, tsk tsk, and then he speaks. “What in God’s name is the world coming to these days?”

“But Deedee’s no stranger!” Natalie says.

“What’s the difference? I’m ashamed for him to see this,” Albert says.

Madame Tilly, with her back to Claude and side to side with Jeanne, winks and raises her elbow, swigs (with a cartoonish expression of delight) some imaginary fluid, and then gives a pitying look. The meaning of this routine: Claude is a child of drunkenness.

“You, ashamed! That’s one for the books.” Antoine cries.

“You don’t know me.” Albert’s words sound sincere, labored, replete with a world of meaning, and Natalie wishes she could stroke the short, silky hair on her brother’s neck. Why is Claude laughing now? It doesn’t make him any more attractive, with his jagged yellow teeth tapering toward the gum line.

“Nobody knows you, do they, Bertie,” Claude says, and he goes on laughing.

“Bertie, he calls his own father, imagine if we’d done that back at home,” but Natalie has no answer to Lotte’s complaint; she feels the fatigue spreading through her body, she’s ashamed of everyone’s behavior on a day like this, such a wonderful day, and in plain view of Jeanne’s foreigner, who has his hands crossed over his belly and is twiddling his thumbs, watching everything and not making a peep.

“All right, everyone,” says Natalie, “it’s time,” and she’s surprised by the eagerness with which they stand up. The close-packed, quivering mob throngs toward the door, ready for the dash out of her drawing room, out of her house.

“Look where you’re going,” says Giaco’s raw, grasping, rotten-ripe, foreign voice. She can’t see who’s gotten in his way but has no doubt it’s Claude, who should know better—Giaco doesn’t like to be touched, everyone everywhere’s always contaminated.

In the garden, as the family breathes in the country air—farm-fresh, purity guaranteed—Claude lights a cigarette, coughs extravagantly and moans, and takes Natalie’s arm, his whole upper body still heaving.

“Hush, people are staring,” she says. The Sunday villagers, the teacher out with his young daughter, the barkeepers are gawking.

Turquoise at the bottom and the palest of greens towards the tops—this is the color of the oats. You bite holes in the stalk, Jeanne, and before you know it an otherworldly squeak emerges from your lips, a kitten held too tightly by the throat. At an unexpected swerve, Natalie feels Claude’s hip against hers. Lotte is telling a peevish story, but she’s not listening, it’s about tomcat Whisky’s intestines. In front of her is Albert, eldest of the Heylens, the apple of Mother’s eye and Natalie’s favorite brother too, since a long time ago, when they were children, the Heylens, a farm family in Schilferinge. Albert is looking dapper today, especially now, in the sunlight, where they can see that his jacket—a touch too long in the sleeves—is made from fine black doeskin wool. She quickens her

step until she's at his side. Next to her, his silhouette shuffles, dwindling, dulled—yes, he's wounded; even in the old days, as a child, she used to suppose that her eldest brother had secrets he could share with no one, something like Alfred de Musset, whose soul was likewise dark and impenetrable even to himself—his jutting chin has two loose flaps of flesh beside it that blend into the mass of shriveled gills below, where the gleaming mica collar presses tight. She touches her brother's sleeve; his bloodshot eyes, full of revulsion and hate for everything that she—his sweet Natalie—is not, are leveled at the others next to her, at the village filling with people, at the churchgoers.